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## Community-Based Research: Analysis of Outcomes for Learning and Social Change: An Introduction

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## **COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH: ANALYSIS OF OUTCOMES FOR LEARNING AND SOCIAL CHANGE\***

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### ABSTRACT

Broadly defined, community-based research (CBR) is a process of conducting research that embraces and integrates the participation and local knowledge of people in communities and organizations with the goal of informing efforts to achieve social change. Although several publications on CBR exist, they primarily focus on processes, methods, and tools for developing and implementing CBR projects. This special issue of the *Journal of Rural Social Sciences* builds from that knowledge base, analyzes the outcomes of real-world CBR projects, and assesses learning outcomes for students, faculty, organizations, and community residents. This introduction to the special issue provides an overview of the academic and practical applications of community-based research that aim to achieve learning outcomes and social change for both university- and community-based partners. It includes a review of theoretical concepts and methodological approaches comprising CBR, followed by a summary of the articles in this issue.

The idea for developing this collection of individual works on community-based research (CBR) evolved from a workshop at the 2009 annual meeting of the Rural Sociological Society (RSS) held in Madison, Wisconsin, entitled “Community-based Research: Documenting and Learning from Project Outcomes.” The workshop was organized and facilitated by John J. Green and Randy Stoecker, two sociologists with experience in designing and implementing CBR initiatives. Several contributors to this special issue participated in the RSS workshop and were subsequently invited, along with others, to develop manuscripts drawing from their experiences as students, practitioners, and professors working with community-based and non-governmental organizations through a variety of development initiatives.

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The guest editors of this issue, representing the disciplines of community development, sociology, public policy, and demography, have been involved in numerous collaborative CBR projects, over the past ten years, through the Institute for Community-Based Research (ICBR), which originated at Delta State University and now operates primarily through the Center for Population Studies at the University of Mississippi. Their work has focused on documenting and evaluating the needs, interests, and recommendations of service providers following Hurricane Katrina and those of minority and limited-resource farmers in several states; the education and workforce training needs expressed by underemployed women; and other projects with organizations throughout the Mississippi Delta and Gulf Coast regions addressing issues of poverty, education, transportation, access to health care, and sustainable development. This special issue represents a culmination of the editors' efforts combined with those of their co-contributors, which is founded on the desire to provide a theoretically and methodologically informed collection of works derived from actual "on-the-ground" CBR projects, and is accessible beyond the walls of the university. The contributors to this volume come from diverse places and have been involved in an array of different projects, yet they all have a deep grounding in and commitment to CBR.

#### DEFINING COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

The concept of community-based research has evolved out of "participatory" and "action" oriented approaches that emphasize the integration of research, education, and action designed to achieve some level of social change as a key outcome. Critical to this type of research is direct participation by people (e.g., individuals, informal groups, organizations) who will be directly affected by the issue being studied. At the core of CBR is a blend of research approaches that include variations of participatory, action-oriented research, and popular education initiatives (Jordan 2003). One CBR root can be traced to Kurt Lewin's (1948) model of action research that demonstrates how to solve practical problems within organizations through a research cycle of planning, action, and an investigation of the results of the action. By the 1970s, a notable strand emerged through "third world" development projects of the early 1960s (Fals-Borda 1969; Freire 1972), with attention on how social science research could help "move people and their daily lived experiences of struggle and survival from the margins of epistemology to the centre" (Hall 1992, as quoted in Jordan 2003:187). Through the raising of a "popular consciousness" concerned with being critical, emancipatory, and democratic, evoked by anti-colonial struggles and/or national literacy programs in

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various regions of the “third world,” the poor were engaging in their own social and political transformation (Jordan 2003: 187). These and other variations and applications of participatory research (Chambers 1997; Pretty 1995; Reason 2001; Selener 1997; Stoecker 2013; Stringer 2007) have emerged over time, utilizing similar collaborative research processes, such as the one we use as the focus of this special issue—community-based research. These participatory approaches generally share a set of core principles and characteristics, as clarified by Meredith Minkler and Nina Wallerstein (2008):

It is participatory. It is cooperative, engaging community members and researchers in a joint process in which both contribute equally. It is a co-learning process. It involves systems development and local community capacity building. It is an empowering process through which participants can increase control over their lives. It achieves a balance between research and action. (P. 9).

To implement a community-based research project, participation by members of a community or an organization in each step of the research process is critical for maintaining the authenticity of the research as a process of empowerment and a tool for positive social change. Randy Stoecker (2013) outlined how people can participate in, contribute to, and guide each step of the process by identifying the research question to be answered, designing the most appropriate research methods to be employed, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and reporting the results in a way that is useful for meeting the needs of the community-based partners. Participation in each of these steps creates a power/knowledge/action cycle that benefits a community or organization, as Stoecker (2013) described:

Power here means that the group has some stock of resources that allows them to influence their own life circumstances. Action refers to putting potential power into motion to produce actual results. Knowledge refers to understanding the cause-and-effect relationships that explain how power works and distinguish effective from ineffective action. By bringing people together to do the research, participatory action research can build the power of numbers and relationships. By focusing on life circumstances, it can improve action. But the process mostly influences knowledge because it focuses on the steps leading to knowledge. (P. 37).

Studying sustainable agricultural projects in less developed regions of the world, Jules Pretty (1995) presented a typology of participation that illustrates how the concept has been manipulated to maintain traditional power structures through traditional positivist research practices, but has the potential to be used differently in order to redistribute and democratize power over research and enhance desirable outcomes for people at the community level. As has characterized many projects we have implemented through the ICBR network, Pretty (1995) argued that the most desirable level of participation may be one, or a combination, of two types. Participation may be primarily interactive, involving joint analysis, development of action plans, and the formation or strengthening of local institutions. This type of interactive process utilizes interdisciplinary methodologies that seek multiple perspectives and make use of systematic and structured learning processes. As groups take control over local decisions and determine how available resources are used, they have a stake in maintaining structures or practices (Pretty 1995). As a more radical level of participation, self-mobilization consists of people taking initiative independently of external institutions to change systems. External institutions can provide resources and technical advice and retain some control over how resources are used. If governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) provide an enabling framework of support, self-mobilization has broader potential; however, existing distributions of wealth and power could remain in place (Pretty 1995). This typology presents just two of the many possibilities for conceptualizing participation, and it is clear from CBR practice that most projects fall somewhere between them.

To this point, we have reviewed only a small selection of literature on principles and issues related to participatory research out of an abundance that exists. It is important to sharpen one's understanding of what constitutes authentic participatory research and what operates to manipulate or co-opt it, as its use as an alternative research process continues to expand. Simultaneously, consideration should be given to providing different avenues of participation to avoid creating a "one size fits all" dogmatic approach. For instance, many traditional research practices, such as large-scale surveys, could be improved by opening opportunities for grassroots participation and use of data. We encourage readers to explore this growing body of knowledge and the numerous case studies describing ways to design and implement community-based research projects. We now turn our attention to assessing CBR relative to its outcomes for learning and social change, two of the primary themes of this special issue.

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## OUTCOMES FOR LEARNING

As CBR is increasingly used as a research process for identifying and addressing social needs and disparities, more attention is being focused on the outcomes of CBR, and whether or not projects are achieving their specific goals and/or the fundamental goals of participatory and action-oriented research. Whether the outcomes of a CBR project are intended or unintended, they need to be documented and analyzed in order for future projects to be more effective in addressing the needs of the groups involved and/or achieving broader social change. An important outcome to assess is that of learning. How does CBR, as an alternative research process involving broad-based participation and an action orientation in particular places and spaces, increase learning on the part of the project partners?

Attention to alternative systems of learning and action is not new. A notable foundation of participatory research is the ability of people to engage in group-learning processes as co-researchers. Researchers' focus has been on cumulative learning by research participants, for example, recognition that: (1) multiple perspectives contribute to collective analysis, (2) group inquiry and interaction leads to debate about change, and (3) dialogue changes the perceptions of participants and their readiness to contemplate action (Pretty 1995). As CBR is used in the public health arena to address health disparities, researchers are attempting to develop guidelines for evaluating CBR projects and the resources required to promote successful efforts (AHRQ 2004). While evidence suggests that higher-quality CBR designs ultimately contribute to more positive health outcomes for targeted populations, the extant literature does not readily evaluate learning outcomes that may have positive cumulative effects on participants beyond a specified project or intervention. Efforts have been made to address the potential of community-based research for higher education (e.g., Strand et al. 2003), but more attention is needed on issues of learning through CBR.

## OUTCOMES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

A fundamental motivation behind community-based research and other associated participatory and action research approaches is the achievement of social change that improves the quality of life for people, or, at least, results in outcomes that address a particular need in a community or organization (e.g., Green and Kleiner 2010; Israel et al. 2005; Minkler and Wallerstein 2008; Selener 1997; Stoecker 2013; Stringer 2007). Daniel Selener (1997) contends that participatory research is guided by people's values and ideologies about society and organizations. Values help define preferences for courses of action and outcomes, while desirable

activities and outcomes evolve out of ideologies, as sets of beliefs that help to explain the world. Different views are reflected through variations of participatory research and their desired social change outcomes; however, there are some common interests regarding how research should be conducted: (1) value the application of useful knowledge to solve practical problems; (2) attempt to improve a situation by promoting change in the research setting; (3) support participation of those intended to benefit from research activities (Selener 1997). Based on his study of projects in the form of action research in organizations, education, community development, and farmer participatory research, Selener (1997) contended:

Participatory research from a historical materialist perspective and action research in schools from a critical-emancipatory perspective are used by people who hold conflict-oriented ideologies. Participatory research for community development from a pragmatist perspective, action research in organizations, action research in schools, and farmer participatory research are used by people who usually subscribe to consensus-oriented ideologies. (P. 226)

Selener (1997) noted that the desired level of social change, in relation to the range of values and ideologies at play in these varying research contexts, may extend from helping an organization and/or its employees function more effectively or professionally, to empowering the dispossessed and powerless in society through broader structural changes perceived as more radical. There is a broad range of pathways through which social change may be pursued, but for CBR, the critical point is that they should be informed through research.

#### HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Individuals from the disciplines of sociology, community development, demography, public health, and public policy, as well as one practitioner representing a community-based organization, have contributed to this special issue of the *Journal of Rural Social Sciences* by sharing their theoretical and applied perspectives. Short biographies of contributors appear at the end of each article. Here we provide an overview of the articles.

The first three articles of this issue focus on outcomes of community-based research at the local level. The first article by Anna M. Kleiner and Sarah D. Walker, entitled “Lifting Spirits and Changing Lives: Analysis of Outcomes from

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One Organization's Journey with Community-based Research," describes post-Hurricane Katrina CBR projects involving Visions of Hope, Inc. (VOH), a nonprofit organization in Biloxi, Mississippi. Through a personal interview with Walker, the Executive Director of VOH, Kleiner amplifies a voice from the grassroots level and weaves a narrative of Walker's experiences with CBR, a tool her organization uses for developing and delivering services aimed at improving the quality of life of vulnerable populations in the Gulf Coast region. Walker reflects on her changing view of research from that of an extractive process via outsiders to a participatory and empowering process more directly shaped by her organization and community. She articulates specific outcomes of CBR, based on her five-year experience with systematic planning, capacity development, and evaluation projects in collaboration with the ICBR.

The second article by Spencer D. Wood and Ricardo Samuel, entitled "History as Community-based Research and the Pedagogy of Discovery: Teaching Racial Inequality, Documenting Local History, and Building Links between Students and Communities in Mississippi and Tennessee," analyzes learning outcomes for participating students, faculty, and community members engaged in an oral history project on the civil rights movement in Mississippi and Tennessee. Through personal interviews of community members and reflective journaling, service-learning and CBR processes served as mechanisms for enhancing student understanding of racial inequality.

In the third article, "Imagination Enviro-station: Students Connecting Students to Ecological Sustainability," David Burley and colleagues describe the development and learning outcomes of a community-based research project involving an environmental sociology graduate class and elementary school students. Through focus group discussions, the participating students developed their perceptions of environmental identity and engaged in a tree-planting and rain barrel project at an elementary school. The project functioned to address drainage problems at the school, enhance the aesthetic quality of the school grounds, encourage communal relationships, and build an ecological identity for the students.

The next article in this volume discusses strategies for enhancing positive learning outcomes of community-based research. The article entitled "Examining Community-based Research as an Application for Public Health Training," by JoLynn P. Montgomery and Dana Thomas, examines the learning outcomes achieved by University of Michigan public health students as they engaged in two Mississippi projects. Drawing on multi-method data from post-deployment evaluations, participating students, faculty, and staff identified strengths and



weaknesses of CBR to the public health learning process. For the students, CBR provided a rich context for research, personalizing the purpose for engaging in this type of research and the data generated from it, as well as revealing direct benefits to the organizational and community partners.

The final four articles of this special issue explore the further development and elaboration of theoretical and methodological concepts, frameworks, and strategies. In his article entitled, "Community-based Research and the Two Forms of Social Change," Randy Stoecker argues that CBR practitioners often assume that research is primarily causal, and few have experience in producing practical outcomes through research. An effective change strategy embedded in CBR can more likely result in a broader strategy linking knowledge, action, and power. Stoecker proposes a participatory research model grounded in community organizing. The model illustrates a participatory effort to diagnose some community condition, develop a prescription for that condition, implement the prescription, and evaluate the outcomes. He concludes with recommendations on training and community relationships for academic researchers to more fully realize the possibilities and benefits of CBR.

In "Insider, Outsider, or Somewhere In Between: The Impact of Researchers' Identities on the Community-based Research Process," Katie Kerstetter explores the debate over "insider" and "outsider" researchers in the context of CBR outcomes. Based on qualitative interviews with academic researchers and community partners involved in four different research projects through the ICBR, Kerstetter establishes the value of the relative nature of researchers' identities in association with the context of research, moving beyond a more rigid insider/outsider dichotomy. She offers recommendations for researchers working in communities where they are likely to be considered outsiders.

The article authored by Philip Howard is titled, "Increasing Community Participation with Self-organizing Meeting Processes." He explains how traditional meeting formats can inhibit the scope of engagement by participants, potentially limiting the benefits of CBR. By way of a literature review and his personal observations of meeting environments, Howard analyzes potential advantages and disadvantages of three alternative meeting processes designed to maximize overall participation and a more broadly-shared control over agendas: (1) Open Space Technology, (2) World Café, and (3) Dynamic Facilitation.

Finally, in the article entitled "Who Counts Reality and Why It Counts: Searching for a Community-based Approach to Quantitative Inquiry," John J. Green counters the common assumption that community-based research must inherently

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favor qualitative research methodologies. He argues that avoiding quantitative measurement and analysis of social realities in the context of CBR projects can work to disempower people and organizations seeking assistance. Through CBR case studies involving traditionally-underserved farmers and community-based organizations, Green illustrates how a wider range of outcomes can arise from a more holistic and pragmatic approach to research methods and analysis.

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The theories, case studies, and themes discussed in these articles illustrate the broad applications and benefits of community-based research. CBR provides a framework within which researchers and community partners can systematically plan and evaluate the delivery of social services, train the next generation of public health practitioners while providing community health data to nonprofit organizations, and address environmental concerns while building an ecological identity among elementary school students. The first four articles in this volume demonstrate that CBR provides a flexible framework within which to pursue outcomes associated with learning and social change. The last four articles provide a critical examination of CBR approaches, helping to move our thinking forward in terms of our orientation to particular research methods, meeting formats, conceptualization of research partners' roles, and community action.

As the practice of CBR continues to expand, we see a need for additional research in two areas. First, there is a need to examine the implementation of CBR across multiple disciplines and diverse research contexts to help determine the extent to which myriad outcomes for learning and social change can be realized. Second, there are limited voices from community partners sharing their perspectives on CBR's challenges, benefits, and real-world outcomes. While the narrative of Anna Kleiner and Sarah Walker is an initial effort, we would encourage future research to attend to the perspectives of both academic researchers and community partners. Although the articles in this special issue attempt to translate the stories and perspectives of non-academic scholars, more comprehensive documentation of CBR's utility for empowering people at the grassroots level, directly influencing policy development and implementation, and most of all, functioning to transform structures of social and economic inequality across societies, is greatly needed.

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